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Got Offer To Kill King,

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A 46-year-old Rock Hill man has told the House Select Committee on Assassinations that he was once offered $50,000 to kill the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the New York Times reported today.

Russell G. Byers, a former auto parts dealer who was implicated last January in the theft of several statues from the St. Louis Art Museum, said he turned down the offer in late 1966 or early 1967, according to the Times. King was shot to death on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tenn.

The Times story said Byers told the committee that two men from Imperial, Mo., had offered him the money in behalf of a group of conservative businessmen to kill King. Both are now dead.

Sources said Byers' testimony has spurred an inquiry by committee investigators because his brother-in-law, John Paul Spica, was then serving a life sentence for murder at the Missouri State Penitentiary with James Earl Ray, who later pleaded guilty in the death of King.

Ray is now serving a 99-year prison term in Tennessee. Since pleading guilty, Ray has repeatedly denied his guilt in the King murder and has requested a new trial.

An FBI spokesman in Washington told the Post-Dispatch that the St. Louis office of the FBI had received "certain information" about the King assassination in 1973, but would not confirm it came from Byers.

He said the information was never investigated and was placed in the wrong file, and then was turned up by accident

County Man Says

last March. The spokesman took pains to suggest the information may not have been considered reliable.

A Post-Dispatch reporter who attempted to interview Byers at his residence in the 9300 block of Fredric Court was told that Byers was out of town and was not available for comment.

The Times account of a three-month investigation by the House committee indicated that investigators suspected that word of a contract offer on King's life had reached the prison through Spica. But Byers said he had told Spica of the offer only recently, according to the Times.

According to the Times, Byers said he was so shocked by the alleged offer that he told two lawyers and two other unnamed persons about it at the time. So far, Byers has not provided documentary evidence to support his story, the Times said.

Records from the State Penitentiary indicate that Spica and James Earl Ray shared the same cell block and for a short time worked together in the prison bakery. Ray escaped on April 23, 1967, almost a year before the fatal shooting of King.

The Times said investigators are now concentrating on a theory of conspiracy by the conservative business group mentioned by Byers in his testimony.

Spica, 40, who was paroled in 1973 and now runs a fruit stand at Shaw Boulevard and Vandeventer Avenue, declined to be interviewed by New York Times reporters, threatening "I'll blow your head off" if they did not leave, the Times said.

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King

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Spica could not be reached by the Post-Dispatch Tuesday night.

Byers also told the House committee that he had told an informer for the Federal Bureau of Investigation about the $50,000 offer to kill King, the Times said.

Byers said the FBI office in St. Louis had been given details of the offer, but had never investigated, according to the Times report.

A source close to the St. Louis FBI office told the Post-Dispatch that he had never heard of the information on the alleged approach to Byers.

In Washington, FBI spokesman Homer Boynton told the Post-Dispatch that "certain information relating to the Martin Luther King assassination" was furnished to the St. Louis FBI office in 1973.

"We're not saying that it was reliable information," he said. "We're just saying certain information was furnished." He declined to say whether the information came from Byers.

Boynton said the information was never investigated by the St. Louis office. He said it was not cross-indexed under the Martin Luther King file, as it should have been.

Last March, Boynton said, St. Louis FBI agents discovered the material more or less by accident.

"They were reviewing a file in connection with another matter," he said, "and as a result of that, they found the information and realized that it had never been properly indexed. And they immediately advised FBI headquarters."

Boynton said the St. Louis field office then sent the information to FBI headquarters in Washington. FBI headquarters in turn gave it to the Department of Justice, and the Department of Justice turned it over to the House Select Committee on Assassinations, Boynton said.

"It was just put in the file," Boynton said of the 1973 information. "Nothing further was done with it," until it was found last March.

Asked whether the 1973 tip should have been investigated, Boynton said he was not going to second-guess the judgment of the FBI agent in St. Louis who handled it.

"It's kind of hard to tell what judgment the agent and the supervisor made about the reliability" of the information, Boynton said. "In the Kennedy investigation, we checked out thousands and thousands of these. Some of them were very bizarre. And many of them ended in absolutely nothing. And it could have been the judgment of the agents that this was not worthy of following through on."

Boynton said he could not discuss the specifics of the allegations as reported in the Times.

He said the FBI is not currently investigating the information that was furnished in 1973. He said the agency had an agreement with the House committee that the committee would investigate such leads unless the panel asked the FBI for help.

A member of the House committee's staff in Washington said it was committee policy not to confirm or deny reports about matters related to the King and Kennedy assassinations. He said the committee's findings would be contained in its final report to Congress, which is due by the end of the year.

"I just can't comment," the staff member said.

The Times story said House investigators learned that Byers believed the offer to him had been an effort to recruit a "fall guy" who would not actually commit the murder, but who would be arrested for it.

A St. Louis Police Department captain who investigated the Art Museum thefts said he had heard recently that Byers testified before the House committee.

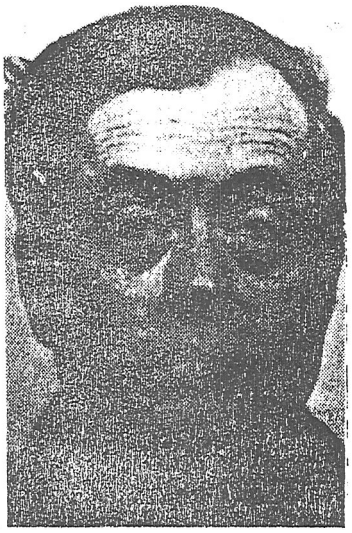
Other officers in the Police Department's intelligence unit said Byers was seen frequently at Spica's fruit stand. Byers had been charged in connection with the Art Museum thefts, but the charges were later dropped by the St. Louis circuit attorney's office.

The widow of one of the men alleged to have approached Byers with the offer on King's life denied such a thing had happened, the Times said. She was quoted as saying that Byers had probably concocted the whole story to "help himself get out of the art case," the Times said.

The woman told the Post-Dispatch Tuesday night that her husband knew Byers through a business associate, but would not elaborate. She insisted that the allegation about her husband was "a glaring mistake."

The widow of the other man from Imperial refused to talk to the Post-Dispatch or the New York Times because she is co-operating with the House committee, according to her attorney.

Her attorney said, however, that the woman told House investigators that the allegations about her husband were a complete surprise to her and she was dumbfounded by the charges.



Russell G. Byers
Questioned in King inquiry

The Times report said that Byers had been granted immunity from prosecution in King's death for his sworn testimony before the House committee in Washington.

A spokesman for Rep. Walter E. Fauntroy, D-D.C., The chairman of the House subcommittee investigating the King murder, said neither Fauntroy nor the subcommittee would have any comment on the New York Times report.

"The committee's policy is not to comment on the investigation or any aspect of it," the spokesman said.

He noted that the full House Select Committee on Assassinations is scheduled to start public hearings Aug. 14. James Earl Ray is to be one of the witnesses.

"If this story is true, I imagine it will come out at that time," the spokesman said.

The assassinations panel has two subcommittees. One of the subcommittees, which Rep. Fauntroy heads, is focusing on the King assassination.